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ABSTRACT

This paper, intended for freshman English instructors who teach reading and writing to both native and non-native students, discusses basic differences and similarities affecting instruction for the two groups. For example, non-native linguistic differences encourage teachers to deal with syntactic interference in reading and with highly embedded constructions in writing. Further, non-native cultural differences urge instructors to treat rhetorically mixed patterns of paragraph development as well as implicit information. And, together, non-native linguistic and cultural differences force teachers to make certain adjustments with assignments and reading and writing materials. Nevertheless, similarities in instruction for native and non-native students far outweigh differences. Not only are objectives the same for both groups of students; many instructional techniques are also similar. Techniques found to be workable in teaching mixed groups of native and non-native students and segregated sections of both groups are listed and discussed. (Author)

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Teaching Freshman English to Native and Non-native Students: Some Similarities and Some Differences

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper, intended for freshman English instructors who teach reading and writing to both native and non-native students, discusses basic differences and similarities affecting instruction for the two groups. For example, non-native linguistic differences encourage teachers to deal with syntactic interference in reading and with highly embedded constructions in writing. Further, non-native cultural differences urge instructors to treat rhetorically-mixed patterns of paragraph development as well as implicit information. And together non-native linguistic and cultural differences force teachers to make certain adjustments with assignments and reading and writing materials. Nevertheless, similarities in instruction for native and non-native students far outweigh differences. Not only are objectives the same for both groups of students, but also many instructional techniques are similar. Techniques which the author has found workable in teaching mixed groups of native and non-native students and segregated sections of both groups are listed and discussed.

Non-native speakers of English pursuing courses of study at American colleges and universities eventually enroll in freshman English, either in special courses in composition and rhetoric intended for international students or in regular courses designed for native students. Unless an institution offers a reading improvement course or operates a writing laboratory--and many do not--non-native students may depend solely on freshman English for reading and writing instruction. In general in freshman English, though writing often appears to predominate, reading is an equally important complementary skill; in fact, native as well as non-native classes ordinarily have an implied dual goal requiring equal emphasis on reading and writing. Thus freshman English instructors who are expected to teach these two skills to either mixed groups of native and non-native students or to segregated sections of both groups ought to recognize the basic differences and similarities between native and non-native reading and writing in order to respond with appropriate instruction.

First, there is the obvious linguistic difference between native and non-native students. As readers, the latter, working in a foreign rather than in a first language, are participating in a more complex process (Yorio, 1971, 113). Using Kenneth Goodman's definition of reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game, Carlos Yorio explains why the reading process is more complicated for non-native students:

> (1) the reader's knowledge of the foreign language is not like that of the native speaker; (2) the guessing or predicting ability necessary to pick up the correct cues is hindered by the imperfect knowledge of the language; (3) the wrong choice of cues or the uncertainty of the choice

> makes associations more difficult; (4) due to unfamiliarity with the material and the lack of training, the memory span in a foreign language in the early stages of its acquisition is usually shorter than in our native language; recollection of previous cues then, is more difficult in a foreign than in the mother tongue; (5) at all levels, and at all times, there is interference of the native language (108).

Yorio delineates three kinds of native language interference experienced by non-native readers: phonological, semantic, and syntactic; the last represents a problem of special concern to freshman English teachers.

In a recent article treating syntactic interference, J. Ronayne Cowan points out that non-native students experience reading comprehension difficulty when they apply native language perceptual strategies in their second language reading situation. Persian (Farsi) students, for example, experience difficulty reading English when they apply the Persian relative clause left-to-right processing strategy to English restrictive relative clauses, which are based on a right-to-left processing strategy for linking relative clauses to their antecedent noun phrases (Cowan, 1976, 100). Cowan details how these readers arrive at a reading comprehension problem: upon meeting an English restrictive relative clause and noting the subordinator that initiates the clause, Persian readers expect an antecedent to appear within the clause, and when they discover that the pronominal antecedent is not in its expected position, they regress and decode again; but, since the initial pronoun agrees with the first and second verb, rereading is likely to produce an incorrect coordinated construction, as Cowan shows in the following example:

(a) He saw the man who said. . . .

(b) He_1 saw the man (and) he_1 said. . . . (101)

Although prediction of such syntactic interference is not always possible or even useful, the Persian example indicates to non-native reading instructors that contrastive analysis--a comparison of the linguistic systems of the first

and second language--remains a means of searching out the causes of reading comprehension problems.

Lois I. Wilson goes beyond syntactic interference to consider other possible causes of syntax-based comprehension difficulties. She reasons, for example, that since some sentence patterns in formal prose are rarely used in speaking, they are unfamiliar to non-native readers and need to be taught (Wilson, 1973, 260). Typical patterns that ought to be taught early include: (1) "There" + "be" + complement, (2) passive voice, (3) relative clauses (Wilson, 260-261). Other research, however, presents an opposing point of view. I.M. Schlesinger, for example, has found that when readers decode complex sentences they rely much less on structural clues than on lexical clues (262); that is, they focus on vocabulary, often ignoring syntax. Nevertheless, Wilson contends that such findings support her conclusion favoring instruction in syntax, stating that "structural clues take on increased importance for students of a foreign language, because they often have a limited knowledge of vocabulary" (263). In addition, Wilson points out that structural clues are especially important to non-native students for increasing their content vocabulary (263). Finally, Wilson demonstrates to reading instructors how they can teach syntactic patterns for recognition by presenting a three-step lesson: review the known pattern, present the new pattern, generalize (264-265).

But how do freshman English teachers discover which syntactic patterns are causing reading comprehension difficulty? One possibility is the cloze technique. I recently administered a cloze exercise--a 250-word passage with every fifth work deleted, the clozure to be filled in by the reader--to a highly heterogeneous group of non-native students enrolled in freshman English and discovered that many of these very different students were having difficulty with the appositive. Because of our limited knowledge of both the reading

process and cloze technique, it does not necessarily follow that students who make structural errors with the appositive on a cloze exercise will therefore encounter difficulty with the appositive in their reading. However, the suggestion is there. Thus, noting the similarity and abundance of a particular error on a cloze exercise, instructors might be inclined to use class time to teach the troublesome syntactic pattern; otherwise, small group sessions or individual conferences might be used to teach these patterns to the several students experiencing difficulty.

Along with discovering probable syntactic difficulties themselves, teachers will also benefit by noting what others have found to be likely problematic structures. Wilson, of course, mentions three ("There" + "be" + complement, passive voice, relative clauses), and David Eskey lists others: unusual inversions, a few subordinators (e.g., unless), some complex noun phrases, free modifiers (like participles), and non-restrictive clauses (1970, 318-319). Mary Pierce considers highly embedded constructions--especially, "the embedding of modifiers within the parts and the embedding of clauses and phrases as initial and final adverbial expressions"--to be a major problem (1973, 274). That is, the embedding of a relative clause within the subject or the insertion of an adverbial phrase preceding the subject may confuse the non-native reader who expects normal subject-verb-complement order. Pierce suggests that instructors teach students to recognize highly embedded constructions as expansions of normal unit expectancy, by fostering understanding of the following principles:

1. There are structural clues that can be used in interpreting sentence development.
2. Even the most complex sentence is based on a simple, normal sentence pattern.
3. The subject is a functional signal for sentence development. The author makes an arbitrary selection, but after he chooses his subject, the rest of the sentence must develop accordingly (275-276).

If it is true, as Pierce, Eskey, Cowan, and others suggest, that because

of their linguistic differences non-native readers are likely to experience difficulty with certain complex syntactic structures, it is equally true that as writers they are likely to encounter some syntactic problems. Referring to advanced non-native writers, Jacquelyn Schachter states: "Their command of English . . . is such that they still need to focus on the structure of the language, since their control of the structure is not comparable to that of a native speaker, not even a freshman" (1975, 39n). Many of these advanced students eventually enter freshman English, where they continue to exhibit syntactic problems in their writing. It is probably not surprising that in the past in freshman English I have found it useful to review with non-native students basic kernel sentence patterns and to teach certain complex structures, especially adverbial subordination.

In addition to responding to linguistic differences evinced by non-native students, freshman English instructors need to consider cultural differences which affect students' reading and writing. Citing Blom and Wilberg's study of attitude content in reading materials in thirteen countries, John Downing concludes that reading materials vary among cultures (Downing, 1973, 105). Ted Plaister suggests that reading teachers deal with this cultural difference by lecturing on cultural content and by having students make comparisons among the cultures represented in class (1968, 166-167). Betty Robinett proposes "a kind of cultural reading readiness," recommending that teachers explain different, unfamiliar cultural concepts to their non-native readers (1975, 33). And, reminding teachers that "the more unlike the cultures, the more likely it is that cultural misunderstandings will occur," Eskey advises that teachers handle "potentially confusing cultural assumptions" (1973, 175) by having students share "cross-cultural information" (180) and by giving them an understanding of

rhetoric across cultures:

> The foreign reader of English, no matter how advanced, may miss or misinterpret the rhetorical signals which, for example, establish the writer's purpose (to inform, to persuade, to entertain), his attitude toward his subject (committed, scientifically detached, ironic), and the logical strategy (induction, deduction, comparison and contrast) by which he structures his text (181).

One technique I have found useful in teaching cross-cultural rhetorical patterns is Robert Kaplan's diagram comparing English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian paragraph development (1966, 15). Also readings about cross-cultural rhetoric, such as Janet Ross and Gladys Doty's essay "Rhetoric Across Cultures," have proved valuable (1975, 108-110). And short humorous readings from such writers as Thurber and Shirley Jackson, as well as the more traditional informative and persuasive selections, help non-native students deal with writer's attitude and purpose.

Two other problems stemming from cultural differences have been proposed by Larry Selinker, R.M. Todd Trimble, and Louis Trimble in their studies on rhetorical information in English for Science and Technology discourse. First, their conclusion that "the typical EST paragraph is a rhetorical mixture" (1976, 285) extends to freshman English where paragraph readings even in non-technical material seldom display pure rhetorical patterns. To help students comprehend rhetorically mixed paragraphs, instructors need to present exercises to teach the sorting out of various rhetorical patterns. Second, they need to give students practice in dealing with implicit information, which Selinker and his associates suggest the non-native reader may have "to extract and reorder" to attain comprehension (290). Two native reading exercises I used last term with non-native students have led me to apply the EST study to freshman English. The first was a reading of a model problem-solving research paper with five main parts: definition, history, current status, probable solution, and future.

All parts but the first were stated explicitly. The definition, however, was merely implied in a paragraph in which the rhetorical function was description rather than definition. A majority of the students were unable to see the definition implicit in the descriptive paragraph until we extracted and reordered the implied information. A similar problem occurred when students were asked to read the English Department's statement on plagiarism. An early paragraph in the reading implied that four classes of plagiarism would be discussed: word-for-word plagiarism, the mosaic, the paraphrase, and the "apt" term. This implied information on classification, however, was hidden from most of the non-native students who appeared to be concentrating on the explicit rhetorical function of the paragraph, which was definition. In this instance I found that a diagram (built from such structural and semantic clues as "at one end, "at the other end," "Between these poles . . . two groups," etc.) aided the students in extracting and reordering the implied information.

Of course, much of what is said about cultural problems in reading also applies to writing, since the two skills are complementary. As Kaplan points out, teachers of writing should expect problems with syntactic and rhetorical patterns: the native Arab speaker, for example, will most likely prefer parallelism to subordination in his writing (Kaplan, 1967, 12). To those instructors who insist on the use of subordination, Kaplan recommends that they teach their students how to decide when to subordinate and that they teach not only the logic of grammatical patterns but moreover the logic of rhetorical patterns (15-16). He suggests that teachers force students to use outlines in order to teach them about the structures of whole compositions (15). Outlining and diagramming, according to Donna Carr, help students visualize organizational patterns for both reading and writing (1967, 32).

One major effect of non-native students' linguistic and cultural differences is their slow reading and writing rates. Although Plaister says that he has been able "to get 125-word-per-minute readers up to about 400 words per minute in one semester (1968, 166), Eskey suggests that "two hundred words a minute or better might be a goal for the advanced foreign student" (1973, 176). Using Eye Movement Photography, John Oller found that while many non-native readers "nearly equaled college-level native performance in terms of fixations, word span, and words per minute" they performed at third or fourth-grade level in terms of eye duration, concluding therefore that "the real contrast between native and non-native performance is in the speed with which they process verbal information in short-term memory" (1972, 314). It is essential that freshman English teachers account for this difference in non-native reading rate by allowing those students more time to complete in-class and out-of-class reading assignments.

The same is true for writing assignments. Like native students, non-natives who write in class must have time to proofread their papers; thus, teachers need either to shorten such assignments for non-native students or to allow them more time for completing unmodified assignments. For example, I find that giving non-native students two class periods to complete a writing exam that native students finish in one meeting is a reasonable approach. Also, it seems logical to allow non-native students more time to complete out-of-class compositions.

Another problem facing freshman English teachers is location of reading and writing textbooks that meet the linguistic and cultural needs of non-native students. For a reading textbook, the choice is usually between an English as a Second Language reader and a text designed for native students. ESL readers, as Kaplan points out, often have at least two disadvantages:

> either they are composed of materials which, because of their simplicity and condescension insult the often highly developed intelligence and mature sophistication of the international student; or they are composed of materials which, mistakenly, strive to give the international student a very contemporary view of American life, and which as a result present that student with selections containing cultural assumptions far beyond his grasp (1963, v).

Native texts, too, are often linguistically and culturally inappropriate, presenting lengthy selections on topics irrelevant to the non-native reader with vocabulary too difficult for him to handle. At Texas A&M University we have used both, but have often found neither satisfactory; until a good reader is designed specifically for non-native freshman, selection of materials will be a problem.

Although the problem is less acute for writing materials--for example, there already exist some good composition textbooks--I have yet to find an appropriate rhetoric handbook or grammar. Since composition textbooks are apt to treat research skills and even major sentence errors (fragments, comma splices, and run-ons) superficially, what appears to be needed is a handbook designed specifically for non-native students, a non-native counterpart to a book such as James McCrimmon's Writing with a Purpose, to be used mainly for reference.

There are other reading and writing difficulties resulting from the linguistic and cultural differences of non-native students. Some teachers, for instance, consider vocabulary a special problem for foreign students. Anne Martin recommends that ESL graduate students be taught academic vocabulary (1976), and Jack Richards lists eight assumptions of vocabulary learning (1976, 83) that at first glance suggest to teachers that non-native students are likely to have more difficulty with vocabulary than native students. However, I find that although content and structural word lists may be useful to some non-native students in writing, in reading, at least, many foreign students have better

developed lexical skills than native students. Recently, a Lebanese student was able to define eight out of ten new English words in a reading by relying on structural analysis and her knowledge of French. In this instance being linguistically different meant handling new vocabulary better than native students.

In spite of the significant linguistic and cultural differences evident between native and non-native students in freshman English, instructors will, of course, note many similarities in teaching both reading and writing. Barry Taylor, in fact, suggests that native and non-native readers are really more similar than different because "reading . . . involves not only linguistic abilities, but also visual, intellectual, conceptual, and psychological abilities and strategies" (1976, 310). Also, both groups in freshman English face the same course objective in reading: to increase comprehension. Frequently, teaching techniques used to assist students in attaining this objective are identical for both sets of students: presenting a full range of comprehension questions from literal to evaluative (that is, taxing all seven levels of the cognitive domain--memory, translation, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation [Burmeister, 1974, 147-148]); helping students determine main ideas of paragraphs and longer selections, differentiate between fact and opinion, and recognize and interpret inferences (Farrell, 1975, 42); introducing SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) for textbook reading (Christ, 1967, 6-7 and Jones, 1968, 19); pointing out denotative and connotative meanings of new words in context; requiring regular use of a college-level English dictionary (as well as allowing use of bilingual dictionaries and a thesaurus); treating flexibility by introducing skimming (Judson, 1972, 144-145) and scanning for test study and library research; fostering affective development by providing

class time for reading appreciation--for example, presenting short one or two-paragraph readings from writers like Chekov, Dostoevsky, Homer, Ignazio Silone, Camus, Flaubert, Arthur Koestler, Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald.

A corresponding long list of similarities exists for teaching writing skills. In fact, Taylor submits that writing a paragraph requires not just linguistic skills but moreover intellectual and logical abilities, skills in which ESL students are equal to native writers (1976, 311). He proposes that teachers employ spiralization, "a process by which a body of material is taught, allowed to lie dormant in the students' minds for a period of time, and is then retaught, usually with more elaborate and complex explanations" (Taylor, 1976, 317). Spiralization, of course, works with both native and non-native students. Vivian Zamel goes beyond Taylor stating categorically that the native and non-native "classroom situations are parallel" (1976, 71). She enumerates what teachers of composition in ESL should learn from research in the teaching of English: that quantity does not improve quality of writing, that grammatically-oriented instruction does not improve students' writing ability, and that syntax and rhetoric are complementary but separate aspects of compostion. While placing primary emphasis on students' creativity (their purposes and needs), Zamel concedes that secondarily instructors might engage in "some indirect teaching concerning particular structural problems, language study and rhetorical considerations" (74). Although Zamel might disagree with suggestions in this paper for teachers to deal directly with non-native students' linguistic and cultural differences, she would no doubt agree with the emphasis on similarities between native and non-native writers.

Since the objectives for writing are the same for both native and non-native students enrolled in freshman English at Texas A&M University--to learn basic

rhetorical patterns, skills in summarizing and abstracting, efficient methods of using the library for research, and accepted techniques of general report writing including documentation and referencing--it is not surprising that, as with reading, many of the teaching techniques for writing are the same for the two groups of students: presenting the basic rhetorical patterns in English--induction, deduction, classification, comparison, contrast, definition, and process; teaching the general principles of good expository writing--unity, development, and coherence; presenting good reading models for writing assignments; using both conventional teacher correction and student-teacher conferences for grading compositions; referring students with special problems to the writing laboratory; employing SQ3R to teach summary writing; showing that summary writing defies development but focuses on unity and coherence; building students' writing vocabulary by concentrating on naunces of meanings among words; requiring a research paper based on the problem-solving format; allowing students to research a problem in their major; guiding students on a library tour; introducing them to major reference sources; providing a clear definition of plagiarism; requiring students to learn basic footnote and bibliography forms for books and periodicals; teaching them the research process so well that they succeed and consider themselves equal to any undergraduates doing research.

For teaching both reading and writing the list of similarities could go on and on. In fact, differences that seemed so pronounced at first are almost lost in the abundance of similarities. But for those who teach native and non-native students in either a mixed or segregated freshman English situation, this preponderance of similarities is a pleasant discovery.

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